

Marriage, Estate Culture and Public Life in Sofia Andreyevna Tolstaya's *My Life*

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Tolstaya, Sofia Andreevna. *My Life*. Trans. John Woodsworth and Arkadi Klioutchanski. Ed. Andrew Donskov. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2010. Lix + 1125 pages. Cloth. 978-0776630427.

I.

My Life is a book of daunting length. In Andrew Donskov's splendid edition, the translation of Sofia Andreyevna's memoir alone runs over a thousand pages, and, with the editor's introduction, genealogical tables, careful translations of Tolstaya's poetry, a scholarly apparatus and a handsome set of photographs, some in color, the entire volume exceeds twelve hundred pages. These pages present to readers a life of epic scope. Tolstaya, who began writing in 1904 and who finished her (still rough) manuscript in spring 1916, recounts her journey from birth in August 1844 to December 1901—a period of fifty-seven years. If readers are denied the satisfaction of a continuous treatment of her husband's final decade, his flight to Astapovo and death, the manuscript, being written during and after those events, nevertheless reflects Tolstaya's final judgments on herself, Tolstoy and their joint life. Indeed, the very fact that much of the manuscript was composed amidst the drama of Tolstoy's last years may help explain the energy of Tolstaya's prose: her lacerating truthfulness is a rare thing even for Russian literature. The unsparing clarity with which she describes Tolstoy's vices as well as

her own moral shortcomings recalls Jean-Jacques Rousseau's acerbity in his *Confessions*.

Tolstaya wrote from sources in her possession—the correspondence and diaries of family members, letters from the literary critic Nikolai Strakhov and other Russian writers, newspapers, books and journal articles—but also, especially in the entries on the 1890s, from memory. She sometimes repeats herself, and there are moments when she seems unsure just when a given event transpired. The editor observes that the manuscript contains certain “factual discrepancies... not only with [her] diaries, letters and literary works as well as Lev Nikolayevich's published writings, but even with other passages of *My Life*” (xiv-xv). The number of such discrepancies is not small, but over the manuscript's vast stretch Tolstaya's control of details is remarkable, and fortunately, where her memory is defective, we can rely on Donskov to provide the necessary corrections.

The published manuscript has the form of an annalistic chronicle divided into eight parts, each part subdivided by topics, which the editor calls “chapters”—873 in all. This mode of organization makes it possible for informed readers to locate subjects of interest to them, although, *caveat lector*, chapter titles do not always correspond perfectly with the actual matters under discussion. By the late nineteenth century, the annalistic chronicle was increasingly regarded as an archaic form for

memoirs, but it is worth noting that Tolstaya was not the only major memoirist of the age to employ it. For example, former war minister Dmitry Miliutin followed this mode of organization in his multi-volume *Memoirs of an Elder Statesman*.

My Life lacks the spontaneity and literary genius of Alexander Herzen's *My Past and Thoughts*, the variegated texture of Vladimir Korolenko's *History of My Contemporary*, the evocative democratic ethos of Maxim Gorky's *My Universities*, and the intellectual precision of Boris Chicherin's *Memoirs*. But as an account of family life on a noble estate Tolstaya's book may be rivaled only by Sergei Aksakov's *Family Chronicle*. In the category of memoirs by Russian women, *My Life* also stands out: it is far more comprehensive than Catherine the Great's *Notes*, or than Karolina Pavlova's fictionalized autobiography, *A Double Life*. In terms of breadth and interest, *My Life*'s only competitor from the early imperial period is the memoir of Princess Ekaterina Dashkova, but a fair comparison would rate Tolstaya's book, whatever its defects, as more profound. I know of no memoir by a woman from the late imperial period that is as finely observed as *My Life*, and in the twentieth century only Nadezhda Mandel'shtam has commented as shrewdly about the vicissitudes of marriage to a world-class writer. *My Life*, in conjunction with Sofia Andreyevna's diaries and letters, makes Tolstaya the Russian woman whom we know the most intimately.

II.

At the memoir's center is Tolstaya's family life: her courtship by Tolstoy, their marriage, their child-rearing practices, their activities at the Yasnaya Polyana estate in Tula province, at their estate in Samara province, and in their Moscow house on Khamovniki Lane. As every close student of Tolstoy knows, the marriage between Sofia Andreyevna and Lev Nikolayevich was not without its trials. By the time they wed in 1862, he was thirty-four-years-old, an established writer much

loved by Sofia Andreyevna for his trilogy *Childhood, Boyhood, Youth* (9). He was also a ladies' man with a string of amatory conquests that ranged from local peasants to native women in the Caucasus. She was a virginal eighteen, shocked to the core by his promiscuity and disconcerted by the suddenness of the break with her family when she followed him from Moscow to the Tula countryside (55, 58). The marriage led to thirteen children, of whom eight survived into adulthood; to at least three miscarriages, one of which doctors inadvertently terminated by applying leeches on Sofia Andreyevna's uterus (163); to efforts at breast-feeding almost every child that resulted in bouts of mastitis and much tension between Sofia Andreyevna and her husband, who insisted, despite her discomfort, that she nurse the infants, because this method is "natural" (xxviii, 96, 537); and more generally to Sofia Andreyevna's exhaustion in caring for the babies, educating the older children, running the household and coping with her husband's needs.

According to the memoirs, Tolstoy was a demanding husband—alternately passionate and cold toward her—who made her feel less like a wife or friend and more like a convenient vehicle for satisfying his lust (507, 623, 635, 735-736, 771). While Tolstaya nevertheless loved him, she faulted him for not helping her more in the raising and moral instruction of the children and for failing adequately to appreciate her self-sacrificing labors. In the early years of the marriage, which, for all their difficulty, she considered "happy," she felt overawed by Tolstoy; in the later years, she felt trapped by her impossible work schedule, offended by Lev Nikolayevich's moodiness and caprices, and repelled by him physically—he an "old man" and she a still youthful-looking and all-too-fertile woman (613, 828, 895). To these grievances she added resentment of the Tolstoyans, the "dark ones" who distracted Tolstoy from family duties and from the writing of fiction. Although most of her sentiments are already familiar from her diaries

and correspondence, the sustained narrative of marital woe in *My Life* is unsettlingly forceful. Many readers may agree with Sofia Andreyevna's verdict that Tolstoy was both an artistic genius and a moral hypocrite, who in the 1880s and 1890s needlessly permitted his religious mission to harm his family life.

Although Tolstaya initially felt isolated in Yasnaya Polyana and crushed by the unfamiliar imperatives of rural living, she eventually came to prefer the estate's pastoral rhythms to the bustle of Moscow and Petersburg. *My Life* reveals how Sofia Andreyevna gradually learned there to nurse, educate, clothe and entertain her growing children. Her descriptions of children's games and of seasonal diversions on the estate are marvelous: they give us a keener appreciation of the world of childhood among the nineteenth-century nobility, and they remind us of the importance of improvisation in raising our own children. *My Life* also shows Sofia Andreyevna as a provider of medicines, material assistance and good advice to local peasants (284, 340, 522). In her telling, Yasnaya Polyana before 1890 was closer and more vital to neighboring peasants than was the district zemstvo or the central government—a striking commentary on the persistence of traditional gentry-peasant relations in the post-emancipation countryside.

My Life describes how the Tolstoys extended their property holdings beyond Yasnaya Polyana, with the 1871 acquisition of an estate in Samara, and the 1881 purchase of their Moscow house. Tolstoy, who fancied himself an entrepreneur but had no nose for business, bought the Samara land to raise horses. At first, he visited the undeveloped property in summer to take *koumiss* prepared by Bashkir tribesmen for its curative effects and to supervise the peasant laborers he had hired to cultivate cereal crops (163–164, 193, 196, 209, 249, 307, 368). Later, the entire family spent parts of the summer in Samara supervising the construction of a home and improving the land. Periodically, the

Tolstoys bought horses to graze their land and to sell at market, but that enterprise never yielded the anticipated commercial returns (212, 225). Although the Samara estate was in this respect a disappointment, in 1891–1892 it became the focus of the Tolstoys' world-renowned famine relief efforts and thus a new basis for the family's influence inside Russia.

After the Tolstoys purchased their Khamovniki Lane house in the early 1880s, they usually wintered in Moscow, where it was easier for them to secure good tutors and doctors for the children. Sofia Andreyevna took advantage of Moscow for her own purposes. She visited the leaders of high society, attended balls and musical concerts, and met prominent intellectuals. After Tolstoy gave her power of attorney to publish his early writings, she used her Moscow connections to arrange the printing of new editions of his collected works. She regarded this enterprise both as essential to her family's financial wellbeing and as an irritant, because it placed her in the awkward position of negotiating with publishers and censors on her husband's behalf. From the late 1880s, she felt that Lev Nikolayevich, who had retained copyright to his books, had foisted onto her the responsibility for dealing with publishers, something she felt he should have handled. Nevertheless, the burden of managing Tolstoy's publications and of settling affairs on the family's various properties broadened Tolstaya's horizons and raised her self-esteem. By the 1890s, she could boast of being the wife of Russia's finest writer, the mother of a large family, an enterprising businesswoman, and a visible member of high society.

Tolstaya's largest source of pride was her role in Tolstoy's literary creativity. As everyone knows, in the 1860s she repeatedly transcribed the manuscript of *War and Peace* to facilitate Tolstoy's corrections. She also offered him advice on the story and its female characters, some of which counsel he accepted as sound. She was mainly responsible for fostering the stable home

environment that allowed him to write with relatively few distractions. During the next decades, she discharged the role of amanuensis, while expanding her activities to editor and promoter of published works, and, in the case of Tolstoy's philosophical treatise *On Life*, to translator (504). By the mid 1890s she had become the unofficial custodian of Tolstoy's archive: She copied his diaries and notes, then removed them to the Rumiantsev Museum for safekeeping—a prudent decision given the danger of fires in the countryside (528, 804). All these labors drained her energies and frayed her nerves, but they also boosted her ego and, in those rare moments when Tolstoy acknowledged their value, made her happy.

My Life can be read as a narrative of a young woman's education, a real-life *Bildungsroman*, in which the fetters placed on the heroine by her marriage begin to chafe, and she in turn tries to cast them off. She complains about her rural isolation, then escapes it; she repudiates her husband's demeaning views of women, as expressed in *The Kreutzer Sonata*, and writes a fictional riposte, the short story "Who Is to Blame?" (633-634, 730); she feels constrained by her husband's "dark" associates, so she drives them away or holds them at arm's length (380, 486, 584, 615, 626, 740, 801). These episodes of self-assertion strike the reader as steps towards Tolstaya's awakening as a woman intellectual whose sensibilities were sharply at odds with her husband's. Yet even when she was most critical of her husband—as when in the 1880s she refused to transcribe his *Critique of Dogmatic Theology*, or, when in the 1890s she dismissed his radical attacks on private property—Sofia Andreevna was mindful of his virtues. The competing desires to free herself from marital oppression and to win her fallible husband's affection provide her narrative's central tension and express the conflict of impulses that characterized her inner world.

The great surprise of *My Life* may be that Tolstaya's voice as an intellectual was strongest

when she acted in concert with her husband. During the famine of 1891–1892 Sofia Andreevna stifled her doubts about Tolstoy's charitable work outside the home. On November 2, 1891 she sent a letter to *Russkie vedomosti* describing peasant suffering and appealing to the wealthy for donations (691–692). This extraordinary letter resulted in a flood of contributions from all over Russia, which she channeled to soup kitchens in Samara and to the Red Cross. In 1892 she herself visited Samara to help in the relief effort. She also intervened in Moscow with the misguided authorities, who had interpreted Tolstoy's article on the famine, "A Terrible Question" ("Страшный вопрос") as a call for revolution (698). Her writings and philanthropy during the crisis transformed Tolstaya into a beloved public figure, a "saint" standing with, not against, her husband.

Tolstaya's account of her son Vanechka's illness and death in January-February 1895 is also remarkable (826–827, 833–842). Her depression and attempted suicide, which she attributes to a presentiment of the innocent child's demise, anticipated her reactions to Tolstoy's departure from home in 1910. But on the occasion of Vanechka's illness, Tolstoy stood at her side caring for the sick boy and for her. After Vanechka's death, Tolstoy carried the coffin, then shed bitter tears for the son who, he had hoped, "would carry on my mission on the earth after I am gone" (836). Misfortune brought together mother and father, two titanic figures, in heart-felt grief. Sofia Andreevna writes about these traumatic events with a maternal passion that is unforgettable.

The Tolstoy's joint actions issued from shared sensibilities that are too easily overlooked in view of their notorious disagreements. For example, before his conversion Tolstoy would often pray with his children, making the cross over them before saying good night. After the conversion and even after his public rejection of the afterlife, Tolstoy privately expressed more traditional religious views. When his beloved Vanechka fell ill,

Tolstoy told Sofia Andreyevna: “His [Vanechka’s] soul was dipped in his body”—these words strongly suggesting an acceptance of the spiritual dualism that Tolstoy elsewhere denied (565). In March 1896 he wrote a letter consoling his wife with the thought that “life is not limited to the one we know here, but is infinite” (875). For her part, although Tolstaya never shared her husband’s categorical rejection of the institutional Church, she defended him in 1901 against the Synod’s excommunication decree, calling it a “cruel decision.” She preferred to think of the Church not as an institution, but as a community committed to love that “transcend[ed] material concepts”—a definition that her husband would probably have accepted (1009—1010).

Tolstaya shared her husband’s fascination with philosophy. She admired Plato and also the Roman Stoics. She valued Nikolai Grot, Tolstoy’s champion in the Moscow Philosophical Society and his consultant and publisher on philosophical matters. She read Vladimir Solovyov with some sympathy for his opinions on Christianity in politics, but she disliked him personally and disapproved of his strange attitude toward love and shame—views not far from Tolstoy’s on Solovyov (545—546, 890). She did not follow Tolstoy into the deep waters of Hegel or Kant, but she read Pascal, Spinoza and Schopenhauer, and she even quoted Schopenhauer to the startled Pobedonostsev in 1885 (448). She also read Nietzsche, disagreeing with his teachings but citing his aphorisms. Like Tolstoy, she had predominantly a practical rather than metaphysical interest in philosophy.

Both the Tolstoys appreciated music, he early in the marriage before turning against it as a “decadent” art, and she late in the marriage when music became her refuge against depression and the world’s ugliness. Her enthusiasm for the great pianist and famous composer Sergei Taneev evoked Tolstoy’s jealousy, but Tolstoy continued to enjoy Taneev’s company: Taneev regularly visited the Tolstoys and played piano for them throughout the

1890s (257—259, 882—883). Indeed, music was seldom absent from Yasnaya Polyana or the house on Khamovniki Lane.

Both the Tolstoys cultivated the visual arts. According to *My Life*, Nikolai Ge and Ilya Repin often came to Yasnaya Polyana, where their paintings were eagerly discussed. Sofia Andreyevna did excellent copies of the various portraits done of her husband, even when she considered the originals flawed. Donskov has reproduced a 1904 photograph of her copying a Repin portrait of Tolstoy. Both she and Lev Nikolayevich were interested in photography, an art she actively promoted and that she herself practiced.

My Life shows that Tolstaya was a social activist with an agenda overlapping her husband’s. Donskov notes that she contributed ninety thousand rubles in her own name to famine relief in 1891—1892, in addition to keeping the books on others’ contributions, purchasing grain and buying cloth for famine victims (liv–lv). At the turn of the century, Tolstaya acted as trustee of a Moscow shelter for homeless children. She organized a public benefit for the shelter and did what she could to advance its mission, much to the irritation of Moscow urban authorities, who pressured her to resign from the shelter’s board of directors (985—988). Meanwhile, she criticized injustice and hypocrisy in Russian educational institutions: witness her intervention in the 1899 Moscow conservatory scandal that led to the removal of the conservatory’s director Vasily Safonov (974—975).

Tolstaya’s activism and her efforts as Tolstoy’s publisher drew her, willy-nilly, into politics. Although Sofia Andreyevna was raised in the family of a court physician, she was at first not interested in the political world. She recalled dressing in “patriot coats” for Nicholas I’s funeral in 1855 (8), and she remembered the pomp surrounding Alexander II’s coronation in 1856. She was momentarily ready to dedicate her life to Alexander—that is, until she witnessed his rudeness at table to his servants (11—12). The

terrorist movement of the 1860s and late 1870s made little impression on her. The bomb blast in the Winter Palace on February 5, 1880 startled her: She reported being “disturbed” by this event, though she did not see fit to comment on it (280). The killing of Alexander II in March 1881 may have been a turning point for Tolstaya. This event, which horrified her, led Tolstoy to write a letter pleading with Alexander III to spare the lives of the late tsar’s assassins (298–299). From Tolstaya’s perspective in 1907, the 1881 assassination was the beginning of Russia’s slide into violent chaos.

In 1885, while in Petersburg seeking permission to publish volume twelve of Tolstoy’s *Complete Works*, Sofia Andreevna met with several high governmental officials. Amongst them were the head of the government’s press affairs department, Evgeny Feoktistov, whom she found to be a polite time-server (447); the future minister of internal affairs Viacheslav Plehve, whom she called “a wooden doll with a wooden face” (445); and minister of education Ivan Delianov, who struck her as “a kind, old, stupid-looking fellow” (446). The climax of her visit was an audience with procurator of the Holy Synod Konstantin Pobedonostsev. Her description of his “gaunt figure with its serious, unkind and completely shaven face,” his “high-pitched acidulous voice,” and his deliberately insulting manners is worthy of Tolstoy himself (447–448). Sofia Andreevna had a better opinion of Alexander III, who, in 1887, approved the staging of Tolstoy’s drama, *The Power of Darkness*, and who, in 1891, graciously received Tolstaya at the Winter Palace. According to the memoir, the hulking tsar was well-informed, good-hearted and gentle, at least in comparison to his ministers (655–658). Nicholas II left Tolstaya cold. She describes him as a “poor thing” and accuses him of “spoiling his initial prestige” (819, 822). She was in Moscow during the 1896 coronation ceremonies where she heard first-hand accounts of the tragedy at the Khodynka Fields (880–881). She apparently agreed with those who

blamed the government for the deaths there. In late 1896, she was appalled when an undercover *gendarme* entered Yasnaya Polyana to spy on Tolstoy and her family (881). In early 1897, when she met minister of internal affairs Ivan Goremykin in Petersburg to discuss the censorship of a new edition of Tolstoy’s works, she took Goremykin’s measure and that of the regime. Of him she wrote: “In every person there is a little window which lets the better side of one’s soul shine through. Either he did not have such a window at all or he had closed it” (901).

III.

As Donskov notes in his fine introduction to Sofia Andreevna’s memoir, *My Life* is the most important documentary source on Tolstoy studies to be published in many years (lix). This is so partly because it provides us access to facts about Tolstoy’s life and creative process known only to her. Donskov also observes that *My Life* is “an important example of a woman’s perspective on late nineteenth-century Russian history and literature.” He calls Tolstaya “a highly independent, cultured, intelligent and literarily talented professional, who was well in advance of her time” (lix). To support this thesis, he alludes to her other writings: her brief autobiography (published in 1921); her short story “Who Is to Blame” (published in 1994); the lively collection of children’s stories *Skeleton Dolls* (1910); and the still unpublished novella *Song without Words*. In view of other recent scholarship on Tolstaya, Donskov is defending a positive assessment of her status as writer and intellectual that is rapidly becoming a consensus in the field. No doubt specialists on Russian literature will write much more about Tolstaya now that Donskov has put into print her lengthy memoir. As a historian, however, I would like to direct attention to three broader questions illuminated by *My Life*: marriage among nineteenth-century nobles; estate culture; and the

relationship between private and public life in imperial Russia.

With rare exceptions, Tolstoy scholars, relying on family diaries and correspondence, have tended to interpret the Tolstoys' marriage as a feature of their biographies, that is, as a product of their personality traits, temperaments and personal choices, with the result that the scholarly literature has foregrounded Tolstoy's moodiness, contradictoriness, unpleasantness and inclination to petty jealousy as well as Tolstaya's alleged intellectual shortcomings, religious traditionalism, waspishness and "hysteria." Those critics alert to gender questions have focused due attention on Tolstoy's antipathy to women, to ways that the gendered discourse of *Anna Karenina* and *The Kreutzer Sonata* eerily evoked the discourse inside the Tolstoys' household, and to Sofia Andreyevna's frustration with the limitations of her roles as mother, as handmaid to Tolstoy, and as ready-made ideological target of his religious critiques. The publication of *My Life* may well provide the impetus for further explorations of gender issues, because Tolstaya often depicts her dissatisfaction explicitly in gendered terms, citing her husband's misogyny as a cause of discomfort.

Perhaps we should also take up a different line of inquiry—namely, the Tolstoys' place in the social history of marriage in Russia. Years ago, while preparing an essay on the hundred wealthiest noble families in the empire, I noticed that there was a frequent discrepancy between women's and men's ages at first marriage (Hamburg, 1980). Wealthy noble women tended to marry relatively young, within a few years after "coming out" into society: the average age of these brides at first marriage was twenty-two. At first marriage, wealthy noble men were, on average, six years older than their spouses (that is, twenty-eight). This difference in average age at first marriage reflected the fact that, before deciding to marry, many young men had taken degrees at the university, had served in the army or the civil service, or had traveled

abroad. (A number of these young men may also have taken advantage of their unmarried status to enter sexual liaisons with peasant women or, in certain cases, with prostitutes: Russian mores from the mid to late nineteenth century tolerated such conduct by unmarried men, without necessarily encouraging it.) In those rarer cases when men entered a second marriage with women entering their first, the age difference at marriage was even more pronounced: men marrying for the second time were on average nearly sixteen years older than their brides.¹

Within the social universe of Russia's wealthiest families, I observed, there occurred a number of first marriages in which very young women (eighteen- to twenty-years-of-age) married much older men (thirty- or more-years-of-age). Whatever the personal factors behind these age differences, the asymmetry in age at marriage must have had a sociological component. In general, men evidently wanted to establish themselves before marriage and to marry younger women, whose ages would make more likely the bearing of children and might also make for more pliable spouses. Young women sought older mates whose service position, intellectual attainment or connections in society would, along with wealth, guarantee a brighter future for their families.

We do not know the frequency with which such an asymmetrical marriage pattern obtained among other nobles—say, the wealthiest one percent of estate owners or the upper strata of the middle gentry—but such marriages must have occurred fairly often. In 1863, the artist Vasily Pukirev exhibited a painting called "Unequal Marriage" depicting a wedding party during solemnization of vows. The canvas shows a thin, balding groom in formal jacket, adorned with service medals, looking arrogantly down on a much younger woman, her bent head and puffy eyes suggesting submission to her mate as well as an awareness of the trials awaiting her. The Academy of Arts jury awarded

Pukirev a professorship for this expressive, highly topical painting.

Among intellectuals there were many such asymmetrical marriages. Two examples known to the Tolstoys were Alexander Pushkin's marriage to Natalya Goncharova (at marriage, he was thirty-two, she eighteen) and Boris Chicherin's marriage to Alexandra Kapnista (at marriage, he was forty-two, she twenty-five). The Pushkins' marriage is an interesting point of comparison with the Tolstoys' marriage, for several reasons: the husbands' histories of sexual adventures before marriage; the principals' frankness about sexuality; Pushkin's jealousy of the men with whom his wife routinely flirted, and Tolstoy's jealousy of regular male visitors to Yasnaya Polyana; plus, the publicly advertised troubles between the pairs of spouses. The Chicherins' marriage also has its salience as a point of comparison with the Tolstoys': Chicherin was born the same year as Tolstoy into a family of roughly equivalent wealth; in the 1850s, he and Tolstoy were members of the same intellectual circle in Moscow; Chicherin's wife Alexandra was nearly an exact coeval with Sofia Andreyevna, being just a year younger; the Chicherins' correspondence suggests a similar degree of female dependency on the older spouse in the first years of the marriage, then developing tensions between husband and wife as Alexandra became more assertive; like Sofia Andreyevna, Alexandra operated as her husband's sometime amanuensis; late in the marriage, Alexandra became custodian of her husband's papers, just as Sofia Andreyevna had done.

It may be that asymmetrical marriages were prone to generate certain outcomes: early pregnancies; male jealousy over real or imagined rivals to wifely affections; attempts by husbands to isolate their wives from high society through cajolery (Pushkin's tactic) or through sequestration of the family in the countryside (Tolstoy's and Chicherin's method); the self-assertion by wives of their own identities either by flirtation with other

men (Pushkina's *métier*) or by writing (Tolstaya's vehicle of self-expression) or through charitable work (Chicherina's and Tolstaya's ways). In cases where female self-assertion was part of a gradual, painful or belated process of "awakening" (Tolstaya, Chicherina), there could be explicit resentment of the older husband for harboring misogynist views (Tolstoy stood accused of this), and a declaration of feminist or proto-feminist principles (again, Tolstaya's tactic). Over the long term, asymmetrical marriages transformed women into caretakers of husbands having diminished energy (Tolstoy and Chicherin in the 1890s) or suffering from serious medical problems (Chicherin suffered a stroke near his seventieth birthday; Tolstoy suffered from heart and liver problems). If this picture of asymmetrical marriages is correct, then *My Life* is not just a record of one entangled relationship at Yasnaya Polyana but also an account of broader historical importance illustrating a not uncommon pattern of marriage amongst the nobility.

The social history of marriage in Russia also casts light on the Tolstoys' reproductive lives. According to the data I gathered on the wealthiest nobles, the average number of children born into their families between 1861 and 1917 was four; just over a third of these wealthy families had two or fewer children. However, roughly thirty percent of these families had six or more children, and nine percent of them had eight or more children. On average, the first children of these prominent families were born about twenty months after the parents' first marriage; the second child was born, on average, twenty-seven months after the first; the third child followed the second by an average of thirty months. The average age of women at the birth of their first child was between twenty-three and twenty-four years, but teenage pregnancy was not unknown: in my small sample of elite women, there was one mother who gave birth at the age of fifteen, and another at the age of sixteen. It is difficult to say whether members of the noble elite

deliberately used birth control or contraceptive techniques in order to limit family size, or to space out the children in their families. However, according to historical demographers, minimum birth intervals in various societies where contraception, abstention from intercourse, or deliberate abortion is not practiced are between sixteen and thirty-one months; therefore, since the average birth intervals for second and third children in Russia's wealthiest noble families fell between sixteen and thirty-one months, it is consistent with the evidence to think that Russian noble families did not routinely employ birth control or contraception of any sort (Wrigley 92–94).

Although the Tolstoy family did not belong to the wealthiest stratum of the nobility, their family history can be discussed against the background of reproductive patterns of that group. Sofia Andreyevna entered marriage at an early age, quickly became pregnant, and experienced a series of pregnancies until the end of her fertile years. An important difference between Sofia Andreyevna and many other noble women was that she began her reproductive life earlier than they did, on average: Her first pregnancy occurred at the age of twenty. However, as we have seen, pregnancy at this age, if untypical, was nevertheless not unprecedented, even among the wealthiest noble women. The Tolstoy family's large number of children was unusual by the standard of the wealthiest Russian noble families, but, again, such large families were not unprecedented. On the evidence of *My Life* (and of other sources known to me), Sofia Andreyevna and Lev Nikolayevich did not practice contraception, nor is there clear evidence that they deliberately spaced out their children; indeed, *My Life* suggests that Sofia Andreyevna resented the impossibility of planning her family and felt herself the victim of her husband's impulsive advances. In this emotional respect, the Tolstoy family's reproductive lives seem to have resembled those of their wealthier counterparts but

also the lives of the Russian peasantry. Similarly, there is no evidence that the Tolstoy family deliberately resorted to abortion to terminate pregnancies or that they contemplated the use of abortifacient techniques. The 1890 decision of Sofia Andreyevna's doctor to prescribe intra-uterine leeches during her pregnancy was probably made to benefit both her and the child she was carrying, not to trigger an abortion.² The Tolstoy family lived in a "natural" demographic regime in which God, not parents, regulated the birth of children. From a historical perspective, therefore, we should not regard the Tolstoy family's marriage or their large family as freakish deviations from the patterns observable among the Russian elites, nor should we assume that the emotional texture of the Tolstoy family's relationship was entirely attributable to their discordant personalities, religious disagreements or differing artistic sensibilities. If, as I noted above, *My Life* can be read as a real-life *Bildungsroman*, it can also be read as the most detailed narrative we possess of a nineteenth-century Russian elite marriage.

For a long time, historians have recognized that landed estates were crucial sites of cultural production in imperial Russia. Priscilla Roosevelt has shown how pre-emancipation estates were sites of serf craftsmanship in furniture making, painting and music, and how certain estates constituted a creative paradise for noble intellectuals—a "cultural arcadia." John Randolph's study of the Bakunin family has demonstrated how the cult of domesticity on the family's Priamukhino estate, the religious exaltation of its female members, and the Bakunin family's general interest in philosophy fostered an atmosphere conducive to the development of Mikhail Bakunin's Idealism. There has been less written on estate culture in the post-emancipation era, with the exception being scholarship on Yasnaya Polyana. Among recent publications we have the protocol of an international conference on Yasnaya Polyana as a center of world literature (Алексеева), and a

detailed monograph about everyday life at the estate designed to illustrate the range of Tolstoy's activities there (НИКИТИНА). Unfortunately, most of the scholarly literature on Yasnaya Polyana lacks a comparative dimension: its explicit purpose, after all, has been to analyze the "unique" context in which Tolstoy's genius flowered.

If we read *My Life* alongside the records of the Chicherins' Karaul estate in Tambov province, certain aspects of life at Yasnaya Polyana appear in a different perspective. As Donskov notes, the Tolstoy family were prolific letter writers: Tolstoy wrote roughly ten thousand letters, several hundred of them to Sofia Andreyevna. She also wrote several thousand letters, of which over six hundred were addressed to her husband (xxiv–xxv). The same scale of correspondence can be observed at Karaul, for the Chicherins' letters also numbered in the thousands. In their case, we are dealing with an "epistolary culture" established by the preceding generation and involving the entire extended family (Наумов 1984 and 1985). If this is so, then we should think of the Tolstoy family's indefatigable letter writing not as the result of their unique partnership or even of their several intellectual interests, but rather as one manifestation of what might be understood as elite epistolary habits from the 1820s to 1917.

At Karaul, as at Yasnaya Polyana, creative work occurred in an environment of shared intellectual and cultural interests. Just as Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy routinely showed his writings to Sofia Andreyevna, Chertkov or to others, and sometimes read new compositions aloud at family gatherings, so during the 1880s and early 1890s, when Boris Chicherin was writing his own memoirs, he read chapters to his wife and to close friends in order to solicit their critical reactions. In general, Alexandra Chicherina had complete access to her husband's writings, including the memoirs and correspondence—an arrangement not unlike the one between the Tolstoy family (although the Chicherins did not keep diaries). Moreover, at Karaul, as at

Yasnaya Polyana, family members shared a broad, even omnivorous interest, in wider cultural developments. The Chicherins amused themselves in the evenings by reading aloud from works of literature or history. The books they selected, to take but a few examples, included Shakespeare's plays, Byron's and Milton's poetry, George Eliot's *Mill on the Floss*, Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, Ernest Renan's religious histories, and the multi-volume histories of the French Revolution by Albert Sorel and Hippolyte Taine. The Chicherins also read aloud various memoirs, among them the political memoirs of the Prussian reformer Baron vom Stein and Alexander Herzen's *My Past and Thoughts*. The Chicherins, like the Tolstoy family, followed developments in the arts—particularly in music, photography and painting, although they focused less energy on music and photography than did the Tolstoy family. The Chicherins prided themselves on building for display a collection of sixteenth-century Western European paintings and drawings.

Since Karaul and Yasnaya Polyana were simultaneously sites for creative work and cultural consumption, we should use estate records and memoirs like *My Life* to understand in more detail the *dialectic relationship* between creativity and consumption. Karaul and Yasnaya Polyana were physically isolated from Russia's great cities and thus they were, in Roosevelt's terms, "cultural arcadia," but through family correspondence, book collecting, art and music, a thousand threads connected the two estates with Russian and Western European cultural life. Neither Chicherin's political philosophy nor Tolstoy's devastating religious and social criticism of modern life was conceivable apart from this interconnectedness. To put the matter slightly differently, elite cultural creativity in nineteenth-century Russia rested on intimate familiarity with contemporary cultural trends in Russia and elsewhere—indeed, on the *internalization* of these trends within the family and estate milieus.

The differences between Yasnaya Polyana and Karaul are worth noting. According to *My Life*, much of the activity at Yasnaya Polyana revolved around the children. This did not happen at Karaul, because the Chicherins' three children died—two in infancy, one at age eight. If Tolstoy's study and the children's nursery were the emotional centers of life at Yasnaya Polyana, the gravitational centers at Karaul were the Chicherins' library, where Boris wrote during the day and where the two spouses gathered at night to read, but also the family cemetery. There Chicherin often walked amongst his ancestors' and children's graves, to meditate, to pray and to "commune with the shades." The Tolstoy family, according to *My Life*, buried their dead children not at Yasnaya Polyana but at the Pokrovskoe cemetery some distance away from the manor house. For them, there was no daily reminder of the deceased children (except for a portrait of Vanechka). But such differences between the two estates did not impinge on their importance as venues of intellectual curiosity and creativity.

In her anxious account of her family's interactions with the world outside Yasnaya Polyana, including the world of government officials, Tolstaya raises a large, intractable problem of imperial Russian history—the relationship between family life, *la vie intime*, and the public sphere. Roughly the first twenty years of Tolstaya's marriage passed in the quiet of the Tula countryside, without consistent political intrusions. The Balkan crisis of the mid to late 1870s, the Russo-Turkish war of 1877–1878, Tolstoy's conversion and the assassination of Alexander II, as well as the family's decision to winter in Moscow, slowly changed the situation. In the late 1870s, Tolstoy began publicly to question the wisdom of Russian foreign policy and to wonder about the Russian Orthodox Church's hold on the truth of Christianity; in 1881 he urged the government to alter its responses to the revolutionary movement. According to Tolstaya,

when her husband challenged Church and state, he sought the mantle of martyrdom. For its part, the government, increasingly suspicious of Tolstoy and concerned about the danger of sedition, made more difficult the publication of his spiritual tracts; it also began harassing, arresting and exiling his followers. Predictably, the contest between Tolstoy and the authorities increased his notoriety and thus the stream of pilgrims to Yasnaya Polyana. Tolstaya witnessed these phenomena, and, much as she wished to put an end to them, she discovered the task impossible. In fact, as we noted above, when she took over the duty of seeing her husband's writings into print, she was compelled to navigate the treacherous political currents in Moscow and Petersburg.

Three moments of her "involuntary" political career suggest the perils that threatened private life in imperial Russia. In her 1885 interview with Pobedonostsev, the procurator told her: "I discern no genuine intelligence in your husband. Intelligence is harmony and your husband manifests only edges and extremes in every respect." To drive the point home, he added: "I have to say I feel very sorry for you. I knew you in childhood, I had great fondness and respect for your father, and I consider it a misfortune for you to be the wife of such a man [as Tolstoy]" (448). This short speech by the most powerful official in Petersburg might be thought breathtaking for the way it conflated public business and private matters, except that Pobedonostsev was quite typical among Petersburg officials in seeing *no distinction* between the political and the personal. And, as any conscientious student of Russian literature knows, Pobedonostsev acted as his predecessors had done: We have only to recall Nicholas I's efforts to "advise" Natalya Pushkina concerning her behavior and that of her jealous husband. Tolstaya could only answer Pobedonostsev by parading her marital happiness: "Not only do I consider myself fortunate, but

everyone envies my position as the wife of such an intelligent man [as Tolstoy]" (448).

Then there was Tolstaya's 1891 interview with Alexander III concerning the publication of *The Kreutzer Sonata*. In *My Life*, Sofia Andreevna confesses that the novella had "cast a shadow over me," because "many [people] suspected that [Lev Nikolayevich] had taken it from our own lives" (638). In petitioning the tsar to license the book's printing, she therefore had to rebut Alexander's objection that "the Count is writing against marriage." She told the tsar: "How could the Count be writing against marriage, when he has been proving by his entire life that he is in favor of marriage? We have nine children" (656). By adducing the "private" fact of Tolstoy's marriage and nine children in this political context, Sofia Andreevna illustrated not her own logic as wife and mother but the logic of a system that did not accept the distinction between the private and public.

And finally, in 1901, Tolstaya felt impelled to respond to the Synod's decision to excommunicate her husband from the Church. I mentioned above Sofia Andreevna's conviction that the excommunication violated the Church's mission as a community based on love, but here I want to underline another purpose of her letter. When the threat of excommunication had surfaced in 1900, she had realized that Lev Nikolayevich's exclusion from the Church would mean that Tolstoy would likely be deprived of a church funeral and of burial in sanctified ground. His excommunication would therefore interfere with her *private* choice in marking her husband's prospective death. In her letter to the Synod she asserted that she, not the Church, should and would ultimately prevail at the moment of his interment: "Whom do they [the Synod authorities] want to punish? The deceased person who can no longer feel anything, or those around him—believers who are close to him? If this [ban on Christian burial] is a threat, then who or what is being threatened? Do they expect that to

commemorate my husband and pray for him in church, I would not be able to find either a reputable priest who does not fear people before the true God of love, or a disreputable one who can be bought at a high price to perform such a service?" (1010). The historical salience of this letter inheres in Sofia Andreevna's recognition that, from a Synodal and therefore from a political perspective, it was the Church's and state's *duty* to override any private individual wishes that might interfere with the Church's orderly common life.

Thus, Sofia Andreevna, like countless other Russians, discovered the pain of living under a system that recognized neither the private nature of marriage nor freedom of choice in matters of conscience. The lack of a clearly delineated private-public divide in Russia distinguished it from the eighteenth-century German lands, where cameralist reformists gradually delineated the private sphere, as Isabel Hull has shown. The unfortunate situation in Russia compelled Tolstaya, as a would-be defender of family privacy and of free choice, publicly to advertise her familial situation and private preferences—that is, the system forced her into sordid complicity with its assumptions. In all this, Tolstoy did her no favors when he made clear to his adherents that he saw her as a religious retrograde, as an apostle of private property, and as an obstacle to a more enlightened Church and polity—that is, as an "enemy" of a more just, future order. Given the government's outlook and Lev Nikolayevich's determination to transform Russia, the "haven" of Yasnaya Polyana could not exist in isolation from the hostile outside world. Sadly but inevitably, the Tolstoy's household became a major locus of the ongoing but unsuccessful Russian struggle to emancipate private life from the public sphere. Put another way, between 1881 and 1905 the wished-for distinction between the Tolstoy's private world and the turbulent public sphere was erased from two directions—by Church and state, but also by the Tolstoy's themselves.

The circumstances so well described by William Nickell in his recent book on Tolstoy's death—the family's efforts to manage the insidious media, the Church's intrusions into the family's burial plans, the government's security measures, the attempts by critics of the regime to appropriate Tolstoy's memory for their own political ends—all had roots in the preceding period.

The ironies here run deep. The initially shy, self-protective Sofia Andreyevna was not, by character or conviction, a publicity seeker. Tolstoy himself was a declared champion of the "inner life" over politics. As an admirer of Kantian philosophy and a believer in freedom of conscience, not to mention as a principled opponent of state coercion, he had many reasons to keep Church and state out of private life. Moreover, both the Tolstoyes distrusted the modern media, although they used it instrumentally to good effect, risking, as does anyone who chooses to ride a tiger's back, being swallowed in its maw. Still, the Tolstoyes' entanglement in the public sphere was a poignant chapter in the history of Russians under the absolutist regime. Their compromises with Russia's arrogant officials and with the "new masters" of the media should remind us how hard it has been to achieve personal autonomy in the modern age and how heroic have been liberty's consistent advocates.

Tolstaya's *My Life* is an extraordinary book. Its preface declares: "Anyone's life is interesting, and perhaps there will come a time when my life will be of interest to some who wonder what kind of creature was the woman whom God and destiny found fit to place alongside the life of the genius and multifaceted Count Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy" (xix). *My Life* satisfies that curiosity but also helps us fathom the Tolstoyes' joint quest to live righteously in their much beloved, much tormented Russian land.

Notes

1. The data consisted of a small sample: 103 marriages between members of the 'hundred families' contracted between 1861 and 1917. The data were gathered from Ikonnikov. The sample included all marriages of male members of the hundred families reported by Ikonnikov in this incomplete genealogy. Information in Ikonnikov included dates of birth for spouses, dates of marriage, dates of birth and death for children; Ikonnikov also reported re-marriages and divorces. In some cases, I checked Ikonnikov's entries against materials in the Imperial Senate's genealogical archives in St. Petersburg. Ikonnikov's data proved generally accurate.

2. In the nineteenth century, physicians sometimes prescribed the external or internal application of leeches to cure "uterine maladies" or to make spontaneous abortions less likely. See, for example Tilt, Bennett (286–289).

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